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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 DOHA 000820

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EAIR](#) [ASEC](#) [QA](#)

SUBJECT: QATAR AIRWAYS U.S. FLIGHTS: KEEPING SECURITY ON  
TRACK

REF: DOHA 685

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This cable contains an action request. Please see paras.  
29-30 and Comments section, below.

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(C) KEY POINTS  
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-- A Transportation Security Administration (TSA) October 2008 visit to observe security procedures for direct U.S. flights at Doha International Airport (DIA) revealed that Qatar Airways (QR) was not implementing all aspects of the Doha-specific Emergency Amendment (EA) issued in January 2008. Of most immediate concern, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) police were not carrying out 100 percent x-ray and physical inspection of all hand-carry items as required of QR flights to the U.S.

-- TSA issued a letter of non-compliance to QR on October 28. Following Embassy and TSA intervention, the air carrier and police agreed to comply with the requirement, starting this week.

-- A TSA team of Transportation Security Specialists will return November 29 to assess the airport against International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards and inspect QR against TSA standards.

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(C) COMMENT  
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-- Embassy understands TSA is currently considering another Doha-specific Emergency Amendment. But, given the Qataris' efforts this week to comply with USG security requirements, Embassy strongly recommends waiting until after the upcoming assessment/inspection to alter the current amendment.

-- This latest episode underscores again how the exponential growth of Qatar Airways and the airport has outstripped the capacity of the carrier, police, or civilian regulators to manage aviation security, including security for direct flights to the United States.

-- When Doha opens a new airport in about 2012, the sheer

size of operations will probably force the Government of Qatar (GOQ) to turn to contract screeners. In the meantime, however, the MOI is jealously guarding its prerogative to conduct screening. The challenge for TSA and the USG is to ensure that ICAO and TSA standards are consistently met.

-- The lengthy narrative below provides a detailed account of how we got to where we are.

End Key Points and Comment.

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BACKGROUND  
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¶1. (C) During summer and fall 2007, a series of U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) assessments revealed major problems in passenger and baggage screening and other aviation security areas at Doha International Airport, including for flights to the U.S. Since then, the GOQ worked in a positive manner to address these security concerns. By December 2007, TSA observed improvements in sustaining adequate procedures, allowing flights to proceed. However, TSA decided that to verify sustainability, it would conduct a follow-up comprehensive airport assessment by fall ¶2008.

¶2. (C) In January 2008, TSA issued a Doha-specific Emergency Amendment (EA) to Qatar Airways which required the airline to implement additional security measures. Specifically, the EA requires gate screening procedures to compensate for the

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deficiencies observed at primary screening checkpoints.

¶3. (C) In February 2008, TSA issued a confidential letter to the GOQ with the findings of the initial assessment. This letter was delivered by the Chargé to the Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), the senior representative of the GOQ's aviation sector. The recommended actions fall under the responsibility of the CAA, MOI, and Qatar Airways.

¶4. (C) Over the past year, Post and TSA have expended considerable time and resources assisting Qatar in improving its security posture, including:

-- A dedicated trip by TSA's Assistant Administrator for the Office of Global Strategies in January 2008 to consult with senior Qatari officials and offer any and all assistance.

-- Delivery of an "Airport Security Management" course in January 2008 to 25 mid-level Qatari security officials.

-- Posting a TDY TSA specialist at the CAA from April-August 2008 to act as aviation security consultant as well as to help develop a quality control program, training program, and further liaison and communication between relevant entities.

-- A May 2008 visit by the Frankfurt-based TSA International Industry Representative to ensure Qatar Airways understood required security measures and help as needed.

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OCTOBER VISIT IDENTIFIES PROBLEMS  
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¶5. (C) During a period of a heightened regional threat in October 2008, TSA sent teams to designated airports in the Middle East with direct flights to the U.S. to ensure security standards were being met for those flights. In Doha, this visit revealed that there were still security concerns for flights operating to the U.S. Measures put in place at the boarding gate to address the problems identified last fall had either been discontinued or degraded.

-- First, Qatar Airways and the police were not carrying out

100 percent x-ray and physical inspection of all hand carry baggage at the boarding gate, as required in the January 2008 Emergency Amendment to our bilateral aviation security agreement.

-- Second, there were several problems with the work of police screeners at the gate with flights to the U.S. Alarm resolution (i.e. following up when a metal detector sounded) was not to standard; females were inconsistently searched; screeners were posted far too long at the x-ray machine monitors; and the checkpoint was understaffed and lacked a supervisor.

-- Third, other problems were identified such as parked aircraft not being guarded (per a separate EA for all international airports with departures to the U.S.). Even though in some cases Qatar Airways and/or the police agreed to remedy the situation, it is unclear if these measures will be sustained in the absence of assessment/inspection teams.

-- Fourth, it is clear that communication within and between the various Qatari entities responsible for aviation security (CAA, MOI, and Qatar Airways) remains poor. TSA and the Embassy continue to liaise with all these entities but the U.S. cannot be responsible for organizing or managing Qatar's system.

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SENIOR-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT PROMPTS ASSURANCES OF COOPERATION  
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16. (C) Amman-based TSA Representative (TSAR) for the Middle East, Bryant Chevalier, visited Doha November 11-16 for meetings with Qatar Airways and GOQ officials. On November 16, Ambassador, TSAR, RSO Theus, and Econoff Fabrycky met with the Minister of State for Internal Affairs (de facto

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Interior Minister and head of police) Sheikh Abdulla bin Nasser Al Thani.

17. (C) Ambassador underscored the serious nature of our visit and sought the Minister's assistance in remedying the situation. Ambassador and TSAR emphasized the outstanding items from the last ICAO assessment and the failure of Qatar Airways to comply with the January 2008 EA requiring 100 percent x-ray and physical screening of all personal accessible property.

18. (C) Ambassador noted that the EA-specific decision may be out of the MOI's hands, as Qatar Airways may be making a commercial decision not to abide by the regulation, which would be beyond MOI's control. However, he asked for the Minister's assistance in persuading QR of the gravity of the situation and the need to comply. Moreover, he urged the Minister to provide the resources necessary to allow airport police staff to implement the required procedures. Ambassador noted that he was also seeking meetings with QR CEO Akbar Al-Baker and CAA Chairman Al-Noaimi.

19. (C) The Minister responded that he would like to implement the required measures, and would discuss it with Al-Baker. He committed to providing the resources necessary to implement any required security procedures. He further suggested that TSAR and Embassy representatives meet in a separate working group with the MOI Head of Airport Security Brigadier Nasser Al-Malki and representatives from QR and CAA to discuss remediation of the other outstanding items.

110. (C) TSAR concluded by emphasizing to the Minister the willingness of the USG to do anything it can to help Qatar succeed. He offered to help arrange visits to the U.S. for senior GOQ officials to observe screening and checkpoint features and to meet and consult with senior TSA officials. He also explained how the 90-day notification process works, if improvements are not observed during the next

assessment/inspection.

¶11. (C) Ambassador concluded by underscoring that failure to resolve these issues expeditiously could have serious ramifications. He gave the Minister an Embassy-produced two-page non-paper capturing the history of our bilateral interaction on this issue, and a TSA one-page document requesting specific Qatari assistance.

¶12. (C) TSAR and Econoff later met with Al-Malki to discuss again the specific problem areas identified in the initial ICAO assessment and the October 2008 visit. TSAR provided Al-Malki with TSA's assessment report, contingency trip report, and the Embassy-produced summary of outstanding issues. TSAR and Econoff reiterated that there are presently two matters of concern for the airport police: the non-compliance with the EA, and the back-sliding on screening standards and practices as identified by the Transportation Security Specialist team in October 2008.

¶13. (C) In particular, the October 2008 visit observed problems at the boarding gate and the MOI needs to focus on sustaining security standards there, to include adequate numbers of screeners and supervisors and standard alarm-resolution techniques. In addition, continuing problems noted in the original ICAO assessment still need to be addressed in a long-term, proactive manner, as the MOI works with QR and the CAA. The USG will do all it can to liaise with and inform the MOI of its findings and concerns, but Al-Malki must ensure he has good communication within his organization and with his counterparts in the government.

¶14. (C) Al-Malki generally responded positively to the above points. He reiterated that he is willing to do whatever it takes to meet USG and ICAO requirements, and he wants to continue a dialogue with us to help improve security.

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QATAR AIRWAYS CONCERNED OVER COMMERCIAL  
IMPLICATIONS OF PROCEDURES  
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¶15. (C) DCM spoke by phone with QR CEO Akbar al-Baker the afternoon of November 16. Al-Baker sounded fully briefed on the issue, having spoken already with the MOI's Sheikh Abdulla. Al-Baker said he was "disappointed" because, he claimed, each time TSA visits, they tell him things are going fine, only to hear later that there are problems.

¶16. (C) Al-Baker complained that Qatar is being treated differently than Abu Dhabi and Dubai even though, he claimed, security procedures in Qatar are identical to those in the emirates. DCM explained that the requirements of the EA were imposed specifically because screening procedures in Qatar were not up to ICAO standards and, bluntly, were not as good as in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. DCM explained that we have observed screening procedures at Doha International Airport and have frequently seen security personnel not paying attention to x-ray machines and not following up adequately when passengers trigger a metal detector.

¶17. (C) The U.S. very much wants Qatar Airways' U.S. flights to succeed, DCM explained, but these security procedures are not negotiable. With a commitment from both Qatar Airways and the Ministry of Interior, the problems can be fixed, but TSA cannot compromise on security requirements. DCM explained that a formal airport assessment and air carrier inspection is scheduled for November 30 - December 4 and recommended that Qatar make a concerted effort to bring screening procedures up to standard, including full implementation of the EA.

¶18. (C) Al-Malki phoned Econoff later that evening, stating he had talked to Al-Baker and they had agreed to implement

the required procedures. Al-Malki stated the police would begin the 100% searches within 2-3 days and we were welcome to come observe their procedures. Al-Baker separately confirmed in a phone call to Econoff November 18 that 100 percent x-ray and physical screening had begun.

¶19. (C) Ambassador met with Al-Baker November 20 to underscore the need for the airline to do everything in its power to ensure ICAO standards are met and that the carrier and GOQ abide by all relevant TSA regulations. Al-Baker was generally receptive to the Ambassador's comments, affirming that a solid security system was in Qatar's interest as much as the United States.

¶20. (C) Econoff then recounted the past year of our interaction on these issues, emphasizing that the October 2008 visit found police standards had slipped from the generally positive level assessed at the U.S. boarding gate in December 2007. Al-Baker conceded that he had twice flown on the direct flight to Dulles and saw that security was "not the same" on one occasion as it was on the other. Al-Baker continued that Qatar Airways and the police are "adopting the (inspection) regime, but not happily."

¶21. (C) He expressed continued confusion over the Emergency Amendment's language on 100 percent x-ray and physical screening, charging that the required policy was not clear to him. Econoff explained again the requirement as stated in the EA, and provided another copy of TSA's October 28 Letter of Investigation to the carrier.

¶22. (C) Al-Baker said the requirements will cause excessive delays and his customers will look elsewhere for flights to the United States. Al-Baker continued that "frankly speaking, I need airplanes for other places" and if the U.S. operations become unprofitable because of security procedures and delays, Qatar Airways would have to pull out of the U.S. He concluded that the carrier is not looking for a shortcut on security, but has to find a way to balance convenience for passengers: "I could give you the most renowned service in the plane, but if I screw you on the ground, I will lose."

¶23. (C) Asked by Ambassador why Qatar Airways does not look to hire contract screeners to deal with police inadequacies, Al-Baker affirmed he would like to do this, but the problem is with the MOI as they see the issue as one of national

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sovereignty and having confidence in the state. As he has in previous meetings with the Embassy and TSA, he asserted that security is no better at other Gulf airports.

¶24. (C) To illustrate his point, he brought out a bag of various large kitchen knives and other items confiscated by Doha customs authorities. He also noted that Qatari authorities had caught several passengers coming from America with prohibited items.

¶25. (C) Ambassador concluded by noting he was encouraged the CEO was paying personal attention to these issues, and he appreciates his constructive attitude in responding to the Emergency Amendment. Emphasizing that he was not making a threat, he noted that the upcoming assessment/inspection would be very important for our bilateral aviation relationship, and if it goes poorly Qatar could be placed in a 90-day action which could ultimately lead to suspension of flights.

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CHARTING A WAY FORWARD  
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¶26. (C) Ambassador has also requested a meeting with the CAA Chairman Al-Noaimi to underscore the serious nature of the USG's concerns over the Emergency Amendment and other security deficiencies, and emphasize the importance of the

rapidly approaching assessment/inspection. This latest episode has again made clear the inadequacy of communication between and within the carrier, police, and CAA, and the need to engage all three entities ourselves to make sure a consistent USG message is understood.

¶27. (C) As noted reftel, as Qatar moves to open a new airport by 2012 which will eventually quintuple its flight and passenger load, it will inevitably have to make major changes to its screening procedures. This will likely include employing contract screeners (the police simply do not have the staffing levels to maintain current airport operations well, much less a far larger airport).

¶28. (C) As noted above, Al-Baker has told us on several occasions that he would like to contract out some of the security functions now, but the Ministry of Interior continues to jealously guard this responsibility at the airport and is reluctant to relinquish any authority in this area.

¶29. (C) The TSA assessment/inspection at the end of November will be a forcing event which will evaluate whether Qatar has made any progress in implementing the recommendations of the last visit and strengthened its security posture per ICAO and TSA standards. Post feels strongly that the USG must be prepared to hold Qatar's feet to the fire to ensure ICAO standards and all TSA-specific requirements are being met.

¶30. (C) Post also strongly recommends that TSA refrain from issuing another amendment until the findings of the next assessment/inspection can be incorporated in crafting a new policy. Issuing a new amendment now would anger the Qataris and confuse our interlocutors about which standard they will be held to when inspectors arrive in 10 days.  
LeBaron